Imagining the Empire under Siege: Sol Plaatje's Writing on the Time during the Anglo-Boer War

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All we claim is our just dues; we ask for our political recognition as loyal British subjects. We have not demonstrated our fealty to the throne for the sake of £.s.d., but we did it to assist in the maintenance of the open door we now ask for, so it cannot be said that we demand too much.

Under the Union Jack every person is his neighbour's equal. There are certain regulations for which one should qualify before his legal status is recognised as such: to this qualification race or colour is no bar, and we hope, in the near future, to be able to record that one's sex will no longer debar her from exercising a privilege hitherto enjoyed by the sterner sex only.

Presently under the British Constitution every MAN so qualified is his neighbour's political equal, therefore anyone who argues to the contrary, or imagines himself the political superior of his fellow subject, is a rebel at heart. (Sol Plaatje, Editorial, "Equal rights," *Bechuana Gazette*, 13 September 1902, 64)

How unlike your Durban and Johannesburg, where our readers write to say they are shown out of the receptions for the sake of their colour, as facilities were offered only to barbarians who played the Zulu dance and gave the visitor an impression that all the Natives could do was dance. Oh no, this is a British town in a British colony and our visitors felt it too; they shook hands, read papers edited and printed by black hands, in the stadt they took seats over carpets spread for them by black hosts. They not only

> sat down but introduced us to their friends, and Mrs Chamberlain also spoke in glowing terms of the beauty of our address. (Sol Plaatje, Editorial, *Bechuana Gazette*, 31 January 1903, 68)

The above statements made by Sol Plaatje (1876-1932)[1] in his English/Setswana newspaper (the first English/Setswana newspaper started and run by Africans) established just after the end of the Anglo-Boer War convey his rather complicated message to British South Africa. On the one hand he expresses his frustration with British South Africa's tardiness in extending Cape Liberalism (colour-blind franchises and technical equality of all before the law)[2] to the rest of South Africa, despite the black population's contribution to the war as "loyal British subjects." On the other hand, rather than criticizing the British Empire itself, he declares his loyalty to and trust in the British Empire for its treatment of South African blacks as equal to whites, a treatment which was the antithesis of the one in Durban or Johannesburg in the Afrikaner territory. In other words, it is his sense of belonging to and his belief in the British Empire (rather than the self-governing settler government) with its "non-racial tradition" that enables him to bolster his argument regarding the entitlement of the black peoples to equal treatment in post-war South Africa.

This pro-imperial attitude itself was not unusual among the mission-educated Christian black elite in South Africa from the 1890's to 1910, who, according to Christopher Saunders, associated Britain "with Christianity, the ending of the slave trade and the emancipation of the slaves" (141) and "called on Britain to give effect to the non-racialism which they regarded as integral to the ideals of empire" (142). Yet one particular thing to note in Plaatje's statements is that among several markers of the black advancement in the British colony, he mentions an environment in which the blacks can "read papers edited and printed by black hands." From this, aside from readily deducing his awareness of the importance of literacy (particularly in English) and of journalism among black peoples as key factors for their empowerment, we see his assumption of a relationship between

the qualification of black peoples as British subjects who are their "neighbour's political equal" under the British constitution and their access to English, or more specifically, their access to what Benedict Anderson would call "print capitalism"; an access which makes it possible for "rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (36), and to form "the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (44).[3]

His confidence in imagining a "British World" in which there is a legitimate place for black South African peoples, such as himself, through their access to many levels of the English information network was undoubtedly consolidated through his experience in Mafeking during the Anglo-Boer War, particularly when the town was besieged by Afrikaners (13 October 1899–17 May 1900). At that time, he, not only as a clerk and court interpreter, but also as a war-time intermediary between the British force and the Barolong population (to whom his family originally belonged) in Mafeking, and a part-time assistant for war correspondents, was fully implicated, through his linguistic talent and literary skills, in the war-time Imperial information network on both the local and international levels. This essay intends to study how the multifaceted aspects of his agency in this war-time network informed his imagining of the Empire, using his writing on his Mafeking days, including his posthumously discovered and published war diary, which was the first of its kind to have been written by a black South African.

First of all, it is worthwhile mentioning how, in Plaatje's formative years, the English language, both spoken and written, was associated not only with the idea of empowerment but also with a way of moving beyond the traditional Barolong community. Educated in a polyglot mission community school, he learnt English, Dutch and German, and several African languages in addition to his native tongue, Setswana. This education brought him a post as a messenger with the Post Office in Kimberley at a salary of £72 per annum at the age of seventeen and he soon became a member of a well-established

mission-educated African community, which mostly consisted of members of Xhosa or Mfengu descent. These people, according to Brian Willan, were strong supporters of "the non-racial Cape franchise" and generally identified themselves with "the cause of the British Imperial Government, to whom they looked for the protection of both the rights and liberties they enjoyed" ("Prelude" 7). He also became an active member of a local association called the South Africans Improvement Association, whose aim was "to cultivate the use of the English language, which is foreign to Africans" and "to help each other by fair and reasonable criticism in readings, English composition, etc, etc" ("Prelude" 7–8). Furthermore, Plaatje's friendship with Isaiah Bud-M'belle, a court clerk and interpreter of Mfengu origin, led to Plaatje marrying Bud-M'belle's sister Elizabeth in 1898— "a controversial inter-tribal marriage in the eyes of many at the time" ("Prelude" 8). It is clear that his mission education in English enabled him to be a part of the urban, multi-ethnic community which, through their newly acquired common language and Christian values, had a strong sense of belonging to the British Empire that had so far provided them with a new set of opportunities.

There are many ways in which his experience in Mafeking made him more aware of his role of enabling his fellow black peoples to be treated as equal to whites in the British colony. First of all, it was his position as a court interpreter, a position which required a high level of proficiency in several languages and a good understanding of the colonial judicial system in South Africa that he regarded as essential in having black peoples share in the benefit of the Imperial law. His understanding of the law is, according to his unpublished manuscript titled "Essential Interpreter" (presumably written in 1908 or 1909), that it "guarantees protection to the man with a black skin as much as it does to the man with a white skin" (53), and this guarantee, without a black interpreter, "exists in theory only and not in practice" (54), as the "administration of justice" in South Africa "where the inhabitants are Englishmen, Dutchmen, and Kafirs of various races, there is hardly any court of law without its interpreter" (51).

Presenting himself as a firm believer of this "equal protection" under the Imperial law, he never expresses any doubt as to the validity of replacing traditional communal law with the Imperial law. The irony is that because of this belief, together with his pride as an agent in implementing this "fair" judicial system, he sometimes suffered from indifference of the colonial authorities to the need of securing good court interpreters (by paying a decent amount of salary) during the war, indifference which he later equated with their indifference "to the interests of a community which should enjoy the protection of a civilized state, in practice as well as in theory" (52). Aside from barely surviving on his salary of £96 per annum as the magistrate's court interpreter, he sometimes had to officiate for the court of appeal for the Bechuanaland Protectorate in the same town with no extra payment. Faced with this situation, he, after verbally refusing to meet their request by telling them that he could not "render free services to facilitate the work of well-paid officer" (52), resorted to the method in which he could make a better use of his linguistic expertise in the colonial judicial institution. In an official letter full of bureaucratic terminology to C. G. H. Bell (the civil commissioner and resident magistrate) in 1900, he asks for improved remuneration, saying that if the Chief Staff Officer was pleased to grant the raise, "such appointment may only be stipulated to interpreting during each session of the Summary Jurisdiction Courts and such other assistance as [he was] able to render the staff, without prejudice to [his] civil duties, the same as [he has] been since the commencement of the siege" (Letter to C. G. H. Bell, 30 January 1900, 43). Later, in the same year, in an application letter to Bell for another increase in salary, he tactfully appeals to the moral basis of the British colonial expansion, their civilizing mission:

> I think it is impossible from the very nature of things that a man, dressed in a chord suit of clothes, dwelling in a Native hut and living on mealies and kafircorn could make a suitable person for the medium of speech between a magistrate and a community as

> we find locally. (Letter to the Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate, Mafeking, 6 June 1900, 48)

He presents himself as "the medium," a mouthpiece of the Imperial judicial institution, a person whose lack of welfare erodes the authority and righteousness of the very institution he serves. In both cases his requests were granted; having appropriated the discourse of the "civilized state," he obviously knew not only how to serve as the "loyal British subject" but also how to make the "administration of justice" work, through negotiation, in order to get his just due.

His other, more important activity after the onset of the war that made him feel that he and his fellow Africans in Mafeking were an indispensable component of the British Empire was his work as an intermediary between the British forces and the Barolong community. It is noteworthy that from the beginning of the Anglo-Boer War, which was officially "a white man's war," British officers armed Africans in the service of the British. As for the case of Mafeking, according to Fransjohan Pretorius, Colonel R. S. S. Baden-Powell used armed Africans "in the military defense of the town" (at the end of siege there were more than five hundred Barolong under arms) and even organized unarmed African units to "steal cattle from the [Afrikaners] who were encamped around Mafeking" (106–107). Under these conditions, Plaatje's work as an intermediary involved reporting the information directly collected from the Barolong raiders who crossed the Boer lines to Bell, the magistrate and the civil commissioner, and thence to the military authorities. It is easy to imagine that this war-time situation not only transformed the image of Afrikaners, the unfavourable white rulers (compared to the British), to that of the clearly defined enemy in the eye of Africans including Plaatje, but also presented a new importance, or even the centrality, of their role in the "white man's war." The following is one of Plaatje's early hand-written war reports to Bell, and we detect under the guise of the "objective" report his desire to communicate the new importance his people assumed in the warfare:

> Morena [Setswana word equivalent to "sir"],
> 20 Barolongs, under Paul, accompanied 80 troopers of the Protectorate Regiment during the small hours of the morning and went to about 400 yards from the laager down Molopo, from where they maximmed and musketted it. They nearly put down every tent and many of the Boers fled up Lothlakane. By that time a large number of them was returning from the eastern camp and our men retreated slowly with only one trooper badly wounded. It was the wish of the Barolongs to go for no other purpose than capturing their cannon but the whites would not do that. They subsequently discovered that they could have found it very easy indeed if they had prepared for it when they started. They were very ably assisted by a '7-pounder' from the Refugees' Camp. They consider the enemy's loss enormous. (Handwritten report to C. G. H. Bell, 7 November 1899, 25–26)

We see not only his certain pride in the British troops' victory over the enemy but also his eagerness to make his people's active participation in the war known. By sparing a few extra lines to explicate the Barolong's purpose which could have been achieved easily only if "they had prepared for it," he indicates both the willingness and the capability of the Barolong to provide a better strategy for the raids than the one provided by the whites.

We lack enough evidence to ascertain how many of his other numerous war reports (most of which do not exist anymore) conveyed his desire to communicate his people's contribution. Yet we witness the similar desire in his war diary, which abounds with the Barolong people's war-time military activities. Of course, diaries in general are of a private nature and are not intended for readership, yet war diaries in Mafeking during the siege were written with a certain journalistic desire to communicate to the "British world." Plaatje himself was surrounded by people, including Bell (whose war diary typed by Plaatje was published after the war), who were aware that their town was engaged "in making history for the British empire" (Willan, Sol

Plaatje: South African Nationalist 78). Moreover, he was exposed to the war-time journalism through his work with the war correspondents (among them Vere Stent from Reuters who, through its extensive telegraphic service, sent their news worldwide from Mafeking) which could have made him more conscious of himself as someone with a potential, through his access to "print-capitalism," to rightfully represent his people's contribution to the "British world." In fact, Plaatje shows in his diary some awareness of a relationship between power and one's access to the means to publish; in describing the Afrikaners' failure to destroy the Mafeking railway station, he speculates that if they succeeded in their attempt, they would "walk in and then publish to the civilized world that they had taken Mafeking at the barrel of the Mauser" (Sunday, 5 November 1899, 29). In this sense, using English to write his diary was his conscious choice, with eventual readers in "the civilized world" in mind. Therefore, his vivid account in the diary of everyday life under siege (with certain innovative expressions, according to Brian Willan, which indicate his conscious effort to "experiment with and to practice the obvious literary skills he . . . acquired in the English language" (*Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist* 78)), especially at the beginning of the siege, tends not only to present the war seen through black eyes, but also to intentionally create a space where the Barolong are recognizably legitimate members of the British Empire in the eyes of the English-speaking public. The following description of an incident is the good example:

> We have a black Sherlock Holmes in the person of Manomphe's son, Freddy. He arrived from Kanya with some dispatches this morning in company with Malno's brother-in-law: the latter was on horseback, which is very risky to cross the enemy lines with. On Friday the horseman remained behind and Freddy came across a party of 60 Boers at Tlapeng. He hid the letters and went straight up to them. They searched him for letters, and on finding nothing on his person, they became very friendly—more so when one of the party recognized him as an old good servant of his.

They gave him a quantity of mutton which he roasted on the spot and had a fine repast at the same time as his Dutch friends. They left the place at 5 p.m. giving him an opportunity of fetching his letters. He reached his home (Ga-molimola) in the evening and hid his letters in an ant-heap close by. Our friend the horseman, who met no Boers, arrived the same evening. Freddy advised him to return to the bush and hide his horse all day next day (yesterday) until dark, when they would plan the best way of getting into town. Freddy became doubtful of the man's aptitude and requested him to hand over his letters to him for safekeeping, which he did.

In the morning a party of 40 Boers rode past Modimola and asked Freddy where the cattle were. Subsequently another party (of 90 this time) also came past. After leaving Freddy's place, this last party observed the spoor of a horse. They traced it to a small village a little beyond, (Instead of going to where Freddy showed him, our foolish friend went to this village.) When the inhabitants perceived the party approaching along the horse's spoor, they decided to give them to understand that it belonged to the owner of the village, and that his son had been riding it looking for stray goats. There was an interpreter of some sort who promptly advanced to meet the ephemeral conquerors of Mafeking and related to them the history of the horse. The head of the village —the old fool—overheard this, and blurted out that he was lying. This infuriated the Boers, who sentenced the interpreter to receive 55 cuts with a stirrup leather for his lies, and made a prisoner of our foolish friend while the interpreter was undergoing the sentence. When Malno's brother-in-law got arrested he whined and begged the Boers not to take him alone as he was not the only offender: there was another man, ahead with the Magistrate's letters, and they came from Kanya together.

The Boers returned to Freddy, who lied so classically, and with such thoroughness and serenity, that they disbelieved their prisoner's statement. They searched his person, his house, nay

everything, but failed to find them; and Freddy walked calmly in here with both dispatches this morning. . . . (Sunday, 12 November 1899, 31–32)

In portraying this exhilarating adventure of Freddy, Plaatje, in order to draw attention to Freddy's serenity and tact with which he outwitted the Afrikaners, compares him to Sherlock Holmes. Plaatje's reference to the fictional detective, who is not only known for his intellectual prowess but also a patriot who carries out counterintelligence work for the government, betrays Plaatje's wish to represent the Barolong man as the typical British hero figure, a worth beneficiary of the equal rights guaranteed under the British rule. On the other hand, the account clearly defines the Afrikaners as the enemy of the Barolong, someone quite ill-fitted to be the rulers of South Africa. The Afrikaners' failure to find the letters typically resulted from their failure, despite their occasional friendliness, to recognize something more than their "old good servant" in Freddy. This inability of the Afrikaners to see black South Africans as possible fellow citizens, with meaningful existences beyond servitude, together with their use of corporal punishment, "naturally" solidifies their position as "ephemeral" conquerors whom the Barolong villagers refuse to serve.

His confidence as a British subject and trust in the British colony waned in 1900, as the prolonged siege forced the inhabitants, particularly the non-white population, to live on limited rations (about which he wrote a letter to the civil commissioner and resident magistrate on behalf of the Barolong chief and headmen[4]) or even on horsemeat (which the Barolong custom generally forbade them to eat), and frequent attack by Afrikaners began to take its toll on lives of his friends. In the middle of February, with no relief from the government in sight, he complains that

> The Imperial Government may be as good as we are told it is, but one thing certain is that it does not care a hang over the lives of its distant subjects. It is distressing to hear that troops are still

> having a holiday at Modder River, even now after we had been besieged over four months. In Kimberley, which is only a stone's-throw from Cape Town, they were still eating horseflesh with 10000 troops at Modder River, and we may safely conclude that we, as far away as Mafeking, will have no more horseflesh to eat by the time they reach here. (Sunday, 18 February 1900, 103–104)

Equally distressing for the loyal British subject such as Plaatje at that time were the complexities of the war-time journalism concerning the siege of Mafeking. While it was an English war publicist's dream to write about the siege with "its strong, masculine hero in Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, its plucky British civilians . . . , and its loyal African population rallying behind the Union Jack" (Krebs 7), Baden-Powell, especially towards the end of the siege, "determined to maintain the fiction that it was 'a white man's war,'" often prohibited the *Mafeking Mail* (the local white paper) from giving a true account of the vital role of the Barolong (Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist* 89). He even blamed the Afrikaner siege for the Barolong's starvation, although that was at least in part caused by his unfair provision of food to the blacks (Krebs 18–20).

Yet, despite this difficult condition, what brought Plaatje a special joy (which made him go so far as to say, "I have never felt better in my life" (Letter from Plaatje to unknown recipient 46)) and possibly brought back his trust in the Empire was typically the publication of his war report (though anonymously) in the *Mafeking Mail* on 16 February in 1900. It was published, with the permission of both Bell and the military censors, as the following article titled "Our Beef Providers":

> The appearance of some under-cut, juicy and succulent, on certain breakfast tables made us curious in this time of siege as to its origin. We learned it was 'Native beef', and the following account, which we prefer to give in its own picturesque language, is

interesting in connection with the subject of our meat supply:

'Mathakgong, the leader of the expedition of 10th, whose loot was captured by the enemy a fortnight ago, said he would not have a quiet night until that fiasco had been blotted out; so on Friday he took four men with him to go and make another trial. Yesterday he and his companions were coming in with what appeared to be a span (12 head) of oxen they had captured close to Batho-Batho's, near Maritzani, at 5 p.m. They brought them down safely until they reached the Magogo valley, where the Boers fired at them. The Boers first of all fired from their right and before they had time to reply another volley came from their left. They replied calmly, four men went to the right (where the heaviest fire was) and one to the left. The Boers soon shut up but not until they had wounded two oxen. One fell amongst the Boers and one just outside our advance trench, and 10 came in safely. . . . ' (44–45)

The publication of this apparently humourous account of the raid published in the white media is meaningful for Plaatje in two ways. First of all, it can be read as a black hero's adventure story: the raid is the outcome of the individual African leader's spontaneous decision and the whole action is totally independent from the operation of the white troops. Secondly, to those who are familiar with the food shortage among the black population in Mafeking, this sheds some light on the question as to who the real food providers are and presents the irony that the very contributors to the food provision in Mafeking are the ones who are made to starve. On the whole, the article powerfully represents the Barolong in the centre of the Imperial war, eroding the myth Baden-Powell (whom Plaatje, in his editorial of *Bechuana Gazette* on 18 November in 1903, actually accuses of "coolly and deliberately lying" about the Barolong's service during the siege) tries to maintain.

Of course, however strong Plaatje's joy is, it is rather reductive to say that the publication of the inherently subversive article is an

example of the black empowerment through their access to the print capitalism against the British rule. It was Plaatje's position as an efficient and loyal civil servant, together with the authorities' permission, that made the publication possible and the fact gives us a glimpse of how the British colonial authority continued a sophisticated negotiation with its educated subjects, which further implicated the colonial elite including Plaatje into the system, or even alienated them from the very people they wished to represent. This explains why Plaatje, despite his tireless effort to represent the interests of his people to the authority in Mafeking and to create a textual space where his people are recognized as loyal British subjects, occasionally showed a surprising degree of blindness to the true nature of his people's suffering under the British rule, particularly the suffering of those who were unwilling to cooperate with the colonial authorities. One striking example is his distress in facing the Barolong's resistance in cooperating with him when he was taking a census of the stadt, a task whose "tedious" and "bothersome" nature he complains as follows:

> The people are vexing me exceedingly: one would ask me what I wished to do with the name of the owner of a place, another would object to a repetition of the census as they were counted (registered) twice already during the present siege. Another would say: 'No wonder the present, unlike all previous sieges of Mafeking, is so intolerable for the unfortunate beleaguered people are counted like sheep.' Another would stand at the door, empty herself of the whole of her stock of bad words, then threaten me to 'just touch my pen and jot down any numbers of her family'. The so-and-so! (Wednesday, 21 March 1900, 124)

As Brian Willan notes, what we hear from Plaatje is no more than the voice of "the harassed civil servant" (*Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist* 84). It was much later that he, in his waning belief in the Empire, was to learn the true nature of the event from the harassing voices of his people; that is, the process (with which he was unwittingly com-

plicit) of how the colonial state, as Benedict Anderson says, through census's "abstract quantification/serialization of persons" (which in South Africa paved its way toward more systemic tax collection, and the dispossession of black people under the 1913 Natives' Land Act) "dialectically engendered the grammar of the nationalisms that eventually arose to combat it" (Preface xiv).

Notes

[1] As Sol Plaatje (Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876–1932), though being a pioneering black South African figure in the history of South Africa, is not well known outside South Africa, a brief summary of his biography might be helpful. Born near Kimberley to Barolong parents, he received a mission-education at Pniel. After working as a pupil-teacher for two years, he joined the Cape civil service and moved to Mafeking and worked as a court interpreter (1898–1902) during the Anglo-Boer War and the siege of the town. (By that time he was known to be fluent in seven languages.) He was an editor of Setswana-English weekly *Koranta ea Becoana* (*Bechuana Gazette*) (1902–1909) in Mafeking and later established the newspapers *Tsala ea Becoana* (*Bechuana Friend*) (1910–1912) and *Tsala ea Batho* (*The Friend of the People*) (1912–1917) in Kimberley.

He was a renowned activist and politician who devoted himself to the enfranchisement and liberation of the African peoples. He was a founding member and first general correspondence secretary of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, founded in 1912) (forerunner of the ANC). As a member of the SANNC deputation, he travelled to Britain to petition the British government against the denial of African rights in the Union of South Africa (1910) including the dispossessions of black people under the 1913 Natives' Land Act. He later travelled to Canada and the United States where he interacted with Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois.

As a writer, he made a great contribution in the field of literature, both in his native tongue, Setswana, and English. He is the author of several pioneering books: He wrote works on the Setswana language including *Sechuana Proverbs* (1916) and translated Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* and *Julius Caesar* into Setswana. His non-fictional works include *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*, edited by J. L. Comaroff (posthumously discovered and published in 1973), which was also published as *Mafeking Diary* (1989), and his political essays, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916). He was the first black South African to publish a novel in English, *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (1930).

[2] Cape Liberalism is an assimilation policy in the Cape Colony, which involved the incorporation of the non-white into the colonial system in a subordinate role with a promise of equality and opportunity (though limited) in education, franchise, and the right to own properties. Originally this "liberal" tradition was to assimilate the

freed slaves, mostly Cape Coloureds, in the early nineteenth century, but by the 1880s, with the series of annexations, Africans became the majority of the Cape population. By the mid-1880s, with an increase of the income of African population and Christianized Africans' increased interest in education, more Africans, though still a minority, began to get their names on the voter's lists. As a result there were more "friends of Natives" MPs in the government. This caused considerable anxiety among the whites and the government endorsed several laws to curb access of non-whites to the franchise from the mid-1880s.

[3] The British Empire was not exactly a nation-state. Yet at least in the case of South Africa in the late nineteenth century, the racial equality under the British constitution which the Cape Liberalism promised to the increasing number of educated and Anglicized black South Africans seemed to help them to "imagine" the British Empire *and* themselves as what Benedict Anderson calls "the nation," which "is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship," regardless of "the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each" (7) individual.

[4] This letter mentions of a grievance of the Barolong that "the shop is conducted in a most irregular manner" and "some people had to await their turn for 3 days" to get their rations (Letter from Barolong chief and headmen to the Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate, Mafeking [undated] 41).

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